Orientalists on the Style of Quran: A Critical Study

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Abstract:
The literary grandeur of the Quranic style is simply inimitable. It treats diverse subjects in such a unique and exalted manner as is nowhere to be found in any genre of Arabic literature. But in spite of its astounding sublimity, some orientalists have bitterly criticized the literary style of the Holy Quran. The following paper is an academic attempt to prove their fallacy and failure to appreciate the incomparable style of the Holy Quran. It includes the representative views of those orientalists who made a scathing criticism as well the ideas of those orientalists who generously acknowledged the exceptional eloquence of the Holy Quran.

Quran is a splendid literary challenge which remained unmet though centuries have passed since its revelation. The most eloquent Arab poets of the past endeavored hard to produce a piece of literature like the Holy Quran but their literary exertions badly failed to bear any resemblance to the inimitable nature of the Holy Quran. Allah (SW) puts forward the challenge in the following verses of the Holy Quran:

وَإِن كُنتُمْ فِي رَيْبٍ مِّمَّا نَزَّلْنَا عَلَى عَبْدِنَا فَأْتُواْ بِسُورَةٍ مِّن مِّثْلِهِ وَادْعُواْ شُهَدَاءَكُم
مِّن دُونِ اللّهِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ

And if ye are in doubt as to what We have revealed from time to time to Our servant , then produce as Surah like thereunto; and call your witnesses or helpers (if there are any) besides Allah, if your (doubts) are true.[1]

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قُل لَّئِنِ اجْتَمَعَتِ الإِنسُ وَالْجِنُّ عَلَى أَن يَأْتُواْ بِمِثْلِ هَـذَا الْقُرْآنِ لاَ يَأْتُونَ بِمِثْلِهِ وَلَوْ كَانَ بَعْضُهُمْ لِبَعْضٍ ظَهِيرًا

> Say: if the whole of mankind and Jinns were to gather together to produce the like of this Qur'an they could not produce the like thereof, even if they backed up each other with help and support.[2]

According to the renowned Muslim Jurist Jalaluddin Sayyuti, Ibn Kaseer, and Ibn Abbas, these verses of the Holy Quran throw a challenge to all literature to create a chapter that resembles the unique literary form of the Quran.[3]It is uncontroversial true that the required tools – the finite grammatical rules and the Arabic alphabet—are available to all but no one has been able to imitate the unparalleled style of the Quran.

Musailima, Ibn Al-Mukaffa, Yahya bin Al-Hakam Al- Ghazali and Bassar ibn Burd but all their strenuous attempts proved ridiculous failures. The reason why these literary geniuses failed to replicate the unique literary and linguistic nature of Quran is that this book is not written by any man rather its inimitable literary form has come from a Divine pen. Forter Fitzgerald Arbuthnot, an eminent orientalist, states:

"…. And though several attempts have been made to produce a work equal to it as far elegant writing is concerned, none has succeeded". [4]

All human authors are only capable of producing known literary forms in the Arabic language and their words and phrases can be replaced by better ones. The sublimity of the Quranic style lies in the fact that it does not fall in any literary genre and its words and phrases cannot be replaced by words and phrases, producing profound meaning and more charmingly eloquent discourse. The Holy Quran breaks all the known and established patterns of literary expressions and scales unattainable heights of literary excellence. Taha Husain, a celebrated Egyptian writer, describes the astounding literary form of the Quran in the following words:

"You know that the Quran is neither prose nor verse. It is rather Quran and it cannot be called by any other name but by this. It is not verse because it is not bound to any verse form. And it is not prose , for it is bound by bonds peculiar to itself , not found elsewhere; some of the binds are related to the endings of its verses, and some that musical sound which is all its own… it has been one of kind, and nothing like it has ever preceded and followed it." [5]

But in spite of what has been mentioned above, some orientalists have tried to find faults with the Holy Quran and consequently associated several

literary defects to its style and form. William Muir, a famous orientalist, says that the Prophet expressed his views in "wild rhapsodical language, enforced often with incoherent oaths in "fragments of poetry".[6] In fact, it is inevitable for those who have scarce and inadequate knowledge of Arabic to criticize the Holy Quran as "literary chaos filled with clumsy syntax" and describe it as "inherently and perniciously defective". [7] Noldeke stated that the Prophet presented "not only the result of imaginative and emotional excitement, but also many expositions or decrees which were the outcome of cool calculation, as the word of God"[8]. He further adds: in point of style, and artistic effect the different parts of the Quran are of very unequal value". According to Noldeke, the older parts of the Quran possess "a wild force of passion, and a vigorous, if not rich, imagination", the greater part of the Quran is decidedly prosaic; much of it indeed is in stiff style'. In his view, the different parts of the Quran are not equally "vivacious, imaginative and poetic"[9]. He further observes that "scrapes of poetical phraseology" can be found in the earlier parts of the Quran and concludes that the Prophet was no "poetic genius".[10] For instance, he used rhyme in treating the most prosaic subjects which engendered the disagreeable effect of incongruity between matter and manner. [11]

Noldeke's analysis of the poetic aspect of the Holy Quran is defective in that the Holy Quran cannot be simply described as poetry because it is not in consonance with any of the al-bihar, the known regular rhythmic patterns of Arabic poetry. Imam Shah Waliullah explains this fact as follows:

و غاية ما يقال فى الفرق بينهما: ان كل منهما نشائد، التى تنشد لالتذاذ نفس المتكلم والسامع، الا ان ابيات مقيدة بالعروض و القوافى التى دونها الخليل بن احمد و تلقها منه الشعراء، و بناء الايات على الوزن و القافية الاجما ليين يشابهان امرا تبيعا، لا على افاعيل العروضيين وتفاعيلهم، وقوافيهم المعينة التى هى أمر صناعى واصطلاحى.

> The difference between poetic couplet and the verses of the Holy Quran: both of them are rhythmic compositions which are recited with cadence to give pleasure to the speaker and the listener. But the poetic couplets are bound to rules laid and compiled by Kahlil Ahamd and learnt from him by the poets. And the verses of the Holy Quran are based on such concise metrical pattern and rhymes as are natural , neither based on the

Afa'eel nor Tafa'eel of the versifiers. As contrary to the verses of the Quran, the latter are artificial.[12]

Regarding the syllabic rhythmical patterns, Muhammad Khlifa concludes:

" readers familiar with Arabic poetry realize that it has long been distinguished by its wazan, bahr, arod and qafiya(i.e. exact measures of syllabic sound and rhymes), which have to be strictly adhered to even at the expense to grammar and a shade of meaning at times. All this is categorically different from the Quranic literary style".[13]

Noldeke's failure to understand that the Holy Quran is not poetry ultimately led him to state "the Koran is never metrical, and only a few exceptionally eloquent portions fall into a sort of spontaneous rhythm".[14]

After describing Quran as metrical fiasco, Noldeke observes that rhymed prose was a favorite form of composition among the Arabs of that day and Muhammad adopted it.[15] He further tries to illustrate it saying that Muhammad calls Sinai *sinin* at 95:2, Elijah (Ilyas) as *Ilyasin* at 37:130. He further opines that in the latter pieces the Prophet inserted "edifying remarks, entirely out of keeping with the context, merely to complete his rhyme".[16]

The Arabic prose can be categorized into rhymed (Saj') and straightforward normal speech (Mursal). The Holy Quran is neither *Mursal* because it employs rhyme, rhytm and unique stylistic features nor *Saj'* as Noldeke thinks it be. The Holy Quran is a miraculous fusion of both metrical and non-metrical speech. This literary blend of metrical and non-metrical is found throughout the Holy Quran.[17] This is encapsulated by the prominent Arabic literary figure Arthur J. Arberry: for the Koran is neither prose nor poetry, but a unique fusion of both.[18]

A close scholarly analysis of the Holy Quran disproves Noldeke's view that the Prophet adopted rhymed prose as medium of literary expression. The Holy Quran transcends the different features of rhymed prose particularly in early Makkan surahs. The Holy Quran employs mono-rhyme and according to an analysis over half of the Holy Quran ends with the same letter.[19] The wonderful rhyme scheme of the Holy Quran cannot be replicated as Devin J. Stewart writes:

Quranic Saj' has much greater tendency to mono-rhyme than does later saj'. A small number of rhymes are predominant in the Quran whereas rhyme in later saj' shows greater variation.[20]

A rough definition of rhymed prose is that it has rhymed endings, however, the Holy Quran does not follow a regular pattern of consistent rhyme. There is no gainsaying the fact that the Holy Quran does not conform to any set pattern of style. According to Rummani, the language of the Holy Quran is

semantically oriented.[21] The same idea is reflected in Devin J. Stewarts' critique, he observes: the Quran allows inexact rhymes which are not found in later saj'[22].

Noldeke further remarks about the narrations of the Holy Quran that "anoculantha" are of frequent occurance [23] and and in many *surahs* the connections of thoughts are interrupted and one finds sudden changes of subjects and frequent omission of "almost indispensable" clauses.[24] Robert Spencer reverberates almost the same idea and observes that reading the Quran is in many places like walking in on a conversation between two people with whom one is only slightly acquainted.[25] He further adds that Quran is not a continuous narrative and the incidents it relates are often told obliquely or incompletely.[26]

Regarding the stories of the prophets, Noldeke observes that links in the sequence of events are omitted and "steady advance in narration" is nowhere to be found.[27] But as regard the logic behind avoiding superfluous details of the stories, Shah Waliullah says:

وا لحكمة فى ذلک: ان العوام اذا سمعوا قصة نادرة غاية الندرة، او ذكرت القصة عندهم بجميع خصوصياتها تفاصيلها فإن طباعهم تميل إلى نفس القصة ويفوتهم الغرض الساس الذى هو التذكر -

> When an exceedingly novel story is narrated with its minute details, the mind of the listeners turns to the story itself and the prime purpose of the story- the moral lesson- is overlooked.[28]

The harmonious arrangement of the different parts of the Quran can naturally be best appreciated by those Arab poets whose excellent poems were put up on the door of Ka'bah. Once a poem by Labib ibn Rahi'ah was fixed on the door of the Ka'bah as a challenge and none among the Arab poets could present anything in competition. But when a part of the Holy Quran was put up near it, Labib was overwhelmed with wonder and immediately recognized that such wonderful words could only be divinely inspired.[29] A. J. Arberry observes that all truth was simultaneously present in the "enraptured soul" of the Prophet and if this truth is admitted the apparent abrupt fluctuations of themes and mood which astonish "critics ambitious to measure" the ocean of eloquence "the thimble of pedestrian analysis" would cease to present any ambiguity and difficulty[30].

"I have striven to devise rhythmic patterns and a sequence- groupings and in correspondence with what the Arabic presents, paragraphing the grouped sequences as they seem to form original units of revelation"[31].

Many others have greatly appreciated the style and language of the Holy Quran. George Sale, a famous orientalist, thus expresses his views about the elegant style and composition of the Holy Quran: the style of the Quran is beautiful, it is adorned with bold figures after the Eastern taste , enlivened with

the florid and expressions and in many places where the majesty and the attributes of God are described , sublime and magnificent .[32] Dr. William Nassau Lees strongly emphasized the value of the Holy Quran as a master piece of Arabic language and literature. It would be appropriate conclude with the gist of his views as he observes that the language of the Quran is not only "elegant" but also "beautiful". It is highly expressive…in parts the language is lofty. And passages related to the grandeur of God may be said to approach the sublime. The greatest elegance, the purest language of the Quran any its composition are incomparable. The Holy Quran is the touchstone by which every composition is tried.[33]

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[1]Al-Quran, 2:23

[2] Al-Quran, 17:88

[3] Ibn Kasir, Isma'il bin Omar, Tafsir ibn kasir, Dar Tayyib Linnashr wa Taudh'ee, 1999

[4] F. Arbothnot, The Construction of the Bible and The Koran, London, 1885, p.5

[5] Lecture entitled, Prose in the second and third centuries after Hijrah, delivered at the Geographical Society in Cairo 1930, Dar al Ma'arif

[6] William, Muir, Life of Mahomet, London, Smith Elder and Co., 65, Cornhill , 3rd Edition p.39

[7] Wansbrough, Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation, Oxford, 1977 pp. 14.18

[8] Noldeke's Essay on the Koran in the Encylopedia Britannica, 9th Edition , Vol.16, 1891

[9] Ibid, p.44

[10] Ibid, p.45

[11] Ibid

[12] Shah Waliullah, Al-Fauzul Kabeer, Darul Asha'at , Urdu Bazar, July 2007, P.383

[13] Muhammad Khalifa, The Authorship of the Quran: Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies . Edited by colin Turner, Vol. I, P.129

[14] Theodor, Noldeke's essay on the Koran in the Encylopedia Britannica, 9th Edition , Vol.16, 1891

[15] Ibid

[16] Ibid

[17] Mitwalli al-Sharwi, The Miracles of the Quran, Dar ul Taqwa, p.31

[18] Arthur J.Arberry, The Koran, Oxford University Press, 1998. P.X

[19] Anne p. Fretwell, Science miracles, Maryland, USA, Amana Publications, 2000

[20] Devin J.Stewart, Saj' in the Qur'an, Prosody and Structure, P.102

[21] Ali Ibn Isa al-Rummani, Thalath Rasa'il Ijaz al-Quran,Cairo, 1956, p.97-98

[22] Devin J.Stewart, Saj’ in the Qur’an, Prosody and Structure, P.102

[23] Noldeke’s essay on the Koran in the Encylopedia Britannica, 9th Edition , Vol.16, 1891

[24] Ibid

[25] Robert, Spencer, The Truth about Muhammad. Regnery publishing, Inc, Washington DC, 2001, P. 20

[26] Ibid, p.21

[27] Noldeke’s essay on the Koran in the Encylopedia Britannica, 9th Edition , Vol.16, 1891

[28] Shah Waliullah, Al-Fauzul Kabeer,P.383, Darul Asha’at , Urdu Bazar, July 2007

[29] Edward, William, Lane, Selections from the Kur-án , 1843, p.88

[30] A.J. Arberry. The Koran Interpreted, The World’s Classics, Oxford University Press,1983, Introduction. P.XI.

[31] Ibid, P. X

[32] George, Sale, translation of the Qur'an p.47

[33] M.M.Ali, History of the Muslims of Bengal, Vol.II, Imam Muhammad Islamic University, Riyadh, 1988, Chapter VII